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ABSTRACT

Foreign language education professionals agree that the profession lacks an established theory and methodological consistency. Foreign language teacher education has not changed much since the 1960s. Most programs consist of subject-matter content, general education requirements, and specialized education courses. Teacher trainee supervisors do not always have experience in foreign language instruction. Legislatively and politically, foreign language teacher education shares many characteristics and problems with other teacher education areas, but competency to teach a foreign language differs in one fundamental way from most other subject areas in that a foreign language teacher cannot compensate for subject-matter (language) deficiencies through short-term research alone. This makes language competence a more crucial long-range consideration in teacher training. Indications of improvement in foreign language teacher education include a shift in emphasis from teacher training to teacher development, increased focus on teacher self-assessment, and an expressed desire for higher program accreditation standards. A tendency toward isolationism in foreign language teacher education points up the need for a unique knowledge base within the profession, leading to more enlightened teacher preparation. (MSE)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on
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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER
EDUCATION

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Foreign Language Teacher Education

Prepared by Gilbert A. Jarvis and Elizabeth B. Bernhardt

September 1984

The Status of Foreign Language Teacher Education Today

Stern and Strevens (1983) state that the experience of the 1983 Georgetown University Roundtable on Languages and Linguistics, which was dedicated to language teacher education (LTE), confirmed "that we lack an established theory of LTE, that research is sparse, that some major differences of view persist, and that even the main issues are not yet very sharply defined" (p. 1). Wing (1984), likewise, cites evidence that in the past 20 years the profession has tended to depend on consensual support rather than research results in the area of teacher competence and effectiveness. Jarvis (1983) has also argued that the knowledge that teachers pass on from generation to generation is largely "craft" knowledge (that which has been learned by trial-and-error experience) rather than research knowledge. Stern (1983) concludes that "language teachers—probably more than other professionals—find that they are constantly bombarded from all sides with a surfeit of information, prescriptions, directions, advice, suggestions, innovations, research results, and what purports to be scientific evidence....It is difficult to find one's way through this maze" (p. 5).

Components of Foreign Language Teacher Education Programs

Although foreign language teaching theories and techniques have changed significantly over the past 20 years, the preparation of foreign language teachers in the mid-1980s has a remarkable resemblance to that of the mid-1960s. The profession continues to view programs as being composed of subject-matter content, general education requirements, and specialized education content.

Subject-Matter Content. Although it is difficult to generalize, it appears that the subject-matter component has changed relatively little. There is greater recognition of the need for more courses for developing language proficiency (speaking and listening ability as well as reading and writing ability) and more culture courses, as well as for experience in a target culture; yet, the small number of students majoring in foreign language education at any institution frequently have limited course offerings. Likewise, most college language departments are staffed by faculty who see themselves as literary

scholars (and teaching literature has far more prestige than teaching language). The net result is content courses that are neither more nor less appropriate than those of the past.

General Education Requirements. This component usually consists of instruction in educational psychology, philosophy of education, and general methods, and often includes more field experience than in the past. The experience may begin as early as the freshman year and may be a part of all the education courses required of a student. The major benefits of experience in schools early in the college career are that students have a greater opportunity to interrelate theory and practice and that they are better able to make an early commitment to being teachers (or to select an alternate career).

Specialized Education Content. One of the most promising developments in teacher education is that more institutions—particularly larger ones—offer specialized methods courses than in the past. Likewise, practicum experiences such as student teaching are now more frequently supervised by language education specialists. A disproportionately large number of these specialists are, however, products (although not necessarily adherents) of the audiolingual era, which made unequivocal prescriptions about how to teach effectively. The legacy of that era, therefore, still lives to some extent via teacher education at a time when the emphasis on communication in the foreign language has supplanted controlled drills and habit-formation psychology.

In small colleges, teacher education responsibilities are sometimes assigned to a faculty member in a language department who may not have specific expertise in the second language teaching-learning process; instead, he or she may merely have taught in a secondary school at some time or may simply have indicated an interest in teaching. As laudable as interest, intuition, and even good intentions are, one cannot really consider this pattern of teacher education to be consistent with what we know about successful teacher education. (Nor can one endorse assigning the responsibility to generalist education faculty.)

Similarity to Teacher Education in Other Subject Areas

Legislatively and politically, foreign language teacher education shares many of the same characteristics and problems of other teacher education areas. Pedagogical knowledge—the knowledge a teacher needs in order to make

informed decisions—is ultimately defined by state legislators, rather than by professional educators. Many states, operating under a “program-approval” concept in which colleges and universities must spell out how required competencies are developed in their programs, have been considering various types of competency testing. According to Galloway’s (1981) survey, however, only three states had implemented competency-assessment certification by 1981. The major frustration continues to be the question of what to assess. Past efforts have focused on relatively low-level subject-matter knowledge, which is easy to measure but not closely related to most definitions of teaching success. Finally, like other educators, language teachers continue to lack special training in the use of high technology, in dealing with handicapped students, and in the special needs of middle school teaching.

Competency to teach a foreign language differs in one fundamental way from most other subject areas. A science or history teacher, for example, can compensate for knowledge deficiencies through several hours of research. A foreign language teacher, however, can do little within a short time to change inaccurate pronunciation. Likewise, the teacher in a communication-oriented classroom has to be able to make statements and comments that he or she has not had the opportunity to plan, research, or rehearse. Thus, subject-matter (i.e., language) competence, which has always been an important long-range consideration in foreign language teacher education becomes even more important as communicative proficiency becomes the primary goal of most language programs.

Improving Teacher Education

There are hopeful signs that teacher education can improve. Recent articles have noted a shift in perspective from the concept of teacher “training” to teacher “development” (Lange, 1983; Wing, 1984). Lange’s model conceptualizes teacher training as a process that begins in the preservice period and continues throughout the inservice stage. Important components within his teacher training model are: (a) methods of teacher selection and self-selection, (b) general teacher education within the humanities and liberal arts traditions, (c) teachers’ language proficiency and cultural knowledge, (d) teachers’ awareness of the language learning process, and (e) the interdependent relationship of teachers and students within the language learning process. Lange contends that the well-trained teacher is one who is continuously in the process of becoming, one who understands the nature of the teaching-learning process and who has real input into this process. Acknowledging issues of teachers’ accountability, Lange supports periodic recertification, reaffirming the notion that teacher training never results in a finished product.

In like manner, Wing (1984) contends that the product model of teacher training (i.e., a specific set of college courses produces a teacher) is no longer viable. Although she concedes that teachers need basic methodological and management skills, she argues vigorously for “competence beyond the classroom” that fosters the development of teachers over time and, as a result, growth for the entire profession. To this end, Wing recommends training foreign language teachers in self-assessment.

Grittner (1981) has argued for a mechanism for teacher training that establishes high standards in order to attract talented and committed teachers. For program approval he recommends standards that require: (a) competency in the use of the target language, (b) skills in language analysis, (c) the knowledge and skills necessary to teach the culture of the target language, using the language as the primary instructional vehicle, (d) the abilities necessary to plan and implement foreign language instruction, (e) professional awareness and responsibility, and (f) knowledge in and the ability to draw from other areas related to the teaching of foreign languages (e.g., learning to work with students whose native language is not English or with students who are visually or aurally handicapped). These six competency areas represent much of the profession’s thinking. The practical problem now is how to fit the components necessary for developing these competencies into a traditional four-year preservice program.

Most language teachers see themselves as different from teachers of other subjects. They recognize that many general teaching strategies (e.g., the lecture) have little application, or require substantial modification, for use in a foreign language class. Thus, a tendency toward isolationism can be detected in foreign language education in general and foreign language teacher education in particular. The result is—for better or worse—that relevant teacher education developments outside the language education field are implemented slowly if at all, with a tendency to follow inbred trends. The challenge is clearly to develop the unique knowledge base that can lead to more enlightened preparation of language teachers.

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